

BE READY SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET READY

by *Olivier Poirier-Leroy*. September 01st, 2016

“You don’t rise to the occasion; you sink to the level of your preparation.” – Chip Kelly.

I remember very vividly the day that I learned this lesson.

A couple hours after a race I was able to sit down in the hotel and watch the video. The first run through I watched to see where everybody else was at in the race—in the flurry of white water over a short course 50m freestyle it was difficult to make out much.

Having accepted the fate of the time that I had posted—well above my personal best and further above what I hoped to go, I figured I may as well pick apart the race to see how I did technically.

In tallying up my stroke count I noticed something that nearly knocked me off of the hotel chair.

In practice, whenever we were doing mega high intensity efforts, I didn’t breath for the first 7 strokes. It wasn’t a stroke count that I had come up with any particular reason. It was just how it came to be done.

In watching the video of my 50m race I realized that without even thinking about it, I had swum out to 7 strokes off the dive and taken my first breath, despite the fact that I didn’t need a breath at that point of the race.

I dove in, took 7 strokes and took a breath to the left, just like I had done in practice for countless repetitions, **without even thinking about it**. To be honest, I didn’t even really remember taking the breath.

While I had always intuitively understood the connection between what I do in practice and how I performed in meets, it was clear the contact between the two was far more influential than I had given it credit for.

THE MAGIC OF BEING PREPARED

There probably isn’t a swimmer on the planet who would argue that preparation is a bad thing. That working diligently to prepare mind and body to achieve a certain result is a poor idea.

But preparation goes beyond just putting in a bunch of meters. In ways that you may not even recognize it becomes a mirror reflection of your training when you stand up on the blocks.

The way we prepare is the way we compete.

How often have you relied on the adrenaline of a packed meet to help you perform? Or brushed aside difficult training because you figured that you would be able to rise to the occasion when the big meet comes around? Or put too much stock in your talent and natural abilities to get you through a competition?

Train as realistically as possible in terms of how you want to perform in competition. Those moments where we have those other-worldly swims are generally flukey and very hard to control—they typically happen only in very precise and impossible to replicate circumstances. (In other words, out of your control.)

What is more likely to happen is that you will rely on your habits from practice—the same breathing patterns, the same turns and walls, breakouts. In fact, much like I did that day, very often you won’t even notice the behaviors from practice carrying over into your competition.

The way we prepare is one thing we can control.

You don’t know how fast (or slow) the swimmers you will be racing against will be. You can’t control the meet warm-up situation, nor can you forecast being late to the pool, getting mildly injured mid-meet, or your goggles filling up with water when you dive off the blocks.

But you can control the way you prepare yourself.

Bob Bowman was known to pelt a pre-Beijing Michael Phelps with circumstances that would challenge him and ultimately prepare him to swim fast no matter what. From training in a dark pool, to swimming without goggles, Bowman expected Phelps to be ready no matter what happened.

And when his goggles filled up in the 200m butterfly in Beijing, Phelps was able to remain calm and rely on his preparation and stroke count to get him home in world record time.

The way we prepare means we don’t have to think so much on race day.

Can you imagine if on race day you had to relearn your stroke and technique from scratch? That for every single stroke, turn, dive, breakout and kick you had to fully think about executing it? It would be impossible and overwhelming to think about all of the technical considerations that go into swimming proficiently while also swimming fast.

Preparing means we don’t have to think about all this stuff. That we can just focus on being calm (or getting more excited, whichever the case is for you) prior to the race, confident in knowing that all we have to do is punch the gas.

After all, look back on those races where you destroyed your best times. Was your mind a flurry of activity? Almost certainly not. In fact, it’s likely you barely remember much of the race at all. Just a feeling of going really, really fast and a sensation of being on auto-pilot.